

Civil War Book Review

Fall 2013

Article 16

Rethinking Shiloh: Myth and Memory

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Recommended Citation

Orr, Timothy (2013) "Rethinking Shiloh: Myth and Memory," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.4.16

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss4/16>

Review

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Smith, Timothy B. *Rethinking Shiloh: Myth and Memory*. University of Tennessee Press, \$38.95 ISBN 978-1-57233-941-5

How We Remember and Why We Remember

Timothy B. Smith's *Rethinking Shiloh: Myth and Memory* is a collection of nine essays about the Battle of Shiloh. All of them are authored by Smith, once a ranger at Shiloh National Military Park and now an instructor at University of Tennessee, Martin. Originally, these essays appeared in various forms between 2006 and 2012. (Four of them first appeared in the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, two essays first appeared in edited books about the Western Theater, two others appeared in *The Civil War Times*, and the last first appeared in the Civil War Trust's magazine, *Hallowed Ground*.) *Rethinking Shiloh* serves as an encore performance of Smith's 2006 book, *The Untold Story of the Battle of Shiloh*—a collection of ten essays—with the crucial exception that *Rethinking Shiloh*, in Smith's words, "aims to delve further into the story of Shiloh and examine in detail how the battle has been treated in historiography and public opinion." (xii)

Taken together, *Rethinking Shiloh's* nine essays represent a wide assortment of topics that only a national park service ranger could have written. Two essays deal with the topography of Shiloh. Three others describe the development and administration of the battlefield in the twentieth-century. Two others demythologize one of the popular battlefield landmarks, the "Hornet's Nest." Finally, the remaining essays discuss the death of Albert S. Johnson and the secession convention delegates from Mississippi who served in his army. Smith spent years studying the ground and it shows. A stellar twelve-page essay examining the mysterious march of Lew Wallace's division closes with important evidence amassed from a sixteen-mile hike led by Smith himself, when he tried to recreate the route of the march in October 2005. Equally important, several essays draw heavily from the files of Shiloh National Military

Park's library and archives. Finally, one of the essays includes comments made by modern visitors to Shiloh. The footnotes reveal Smith himself is the primary source; he overheard these comments while manning the visitor center desk.

If Smith wanted to examine why certain myths gained traction, the essays succeed in their mission. They force the reader to pause and reconsider the Battle of Shiloh through the lens of myth and memory. Arguably, the two most successful essays debunk long-standing myths. One argues that the fighting at the Hornet's Nest did not play a crucial role in determining the outcome of the battle and the other argues that Brigadier General Benjamin M. Prentiss—the Union general who surrendered the Hornet's Nest line—was far from being the battle's hero. The third essay, "Anatomy of an Icon," convincingly maintains that the Hornet's Nest was neither the bloodiest location on the battlefield, nor did it save the day for Ulysses Grant's beleaguered Army of the Tennessee. (Indeed, Smith even suggests that the name, "Hornet's Nest" was not contemporary to the war.) As an iconic symbol, the Hornet's Nest did not emerge as Shiloh's gory epicenter until the 1890s. It happened when the War Department selected 12th Iowa veteran David W. Reed to serve as Shiloh's official historian. Reed, a participant in the Hornet's Nest action, believed that he had experienced the battle's most pivotal scene. Consequently, his 1902 book, *The Battle of Shiloh and the Organizations Engaged*, pushed the Hornet's Nest to the forefront of memory, influencing generations of battlefield scholars.

In his fourth essay, Smith shows that mythology abounded when postwar historians tried to find a "hero" in Benjamin Prentiss, the general commonly applauded for his stubborn defense of the Hornet's Nest line. Smith contends, "There is simply no factual basis for Prentiss's hero status." (82) Like the Hornet's Nest itself, Prentiss benefitted from the forgetfulness of postwar memory. When Prentiss emerged from Confederate captivity in October 1862, few citizens considered him a general of any consequence, and rightly so, for he commanded very few of the troops involved in the Hornet's Nest action. Yet, Prentiss did well bringing attention to himself. Indeed, he could speak with impunity because the other important commander at the Hornet's Nest—W. H. L. Wallace—had died in the fighting. "Thus in large part because of his own actions," writes Smith, "Prentiss was coming to be seen by the early 1890s as the key defender of the Hornet's Nest." (79) In the twentieth-century, as shifting ideas of public memory required Americans to commemorate the Hornet's Nest over other regions of the battlefield, historians began seeking a hero from that sector. They found that in Prentiss, exalting him as the savior of the Union army.

Indeed, in 1956, when Superintendent Ira Lykes commissioned a new introductory film for Shiloh National Military Park (incidentally, the subject of Smith's ninth essay), Lykes and park historian Charles E. Shedd, Jr. chose to made Prentiss the protagonist of it.

Beyond Smith's essays on the Horner's Nest and Prentiss, few additional examples force readers to "rethink" Shiloh's myths. Quite simply, the other essays are not about historiography, though they are quite useful. The ninth essay, which examines the 1956 NPS film, *Shiloh: The Portrait of a Battle*, presents a behind-the-scenes narrative, showing how a budget-constrained NPS staff helped pioneer Civil War filmmaking. Likewise, the first essay—"The Terrain Factor at Shiloh"—cautions battlefield visitors to move beyond traditional narratives to "let the ground speak." (25) Supported by excellent maps, this essay stands out as a masterful innovation, a new way of understanding Civil War tactics through a topographical lens.

Not all the essays ring so clear. For instance, the essay on the New Deal's effect on Shiloh—while exceedingly interesting—leaves the reader asking more questions. Smith argues that the New Deal modernized Shiloh, and he lists the various improvements that altered the landscape, be they good or bad. The author rightly notes how certain New Deal agencies—the TVA, for instance—permanently destroyed sections of the battlefield through improvement projects. Smith explains how this happened, but not why. Certainly, New Dealers lacked the same definition of battlefield preservation as, say, a member of the modern-day NPS. Smith's essay also falls flat by not establishing the proper context for educational changes. Smith argues that the transfer of Shiloh National Military Park from the War Department to the Department of the Interior made it more "inclined to education and interpretation than military ways." (147) Yet again, he leaves the reader wondering why this happened. Why did New Dealers consider it necessary to change the park's educational mission?

Finally, every so often, Smith leaves a tantalizing detail unanswered. In the conclusion of his essay on Prentiss, Smith hints that the Prentiss unintentionally divulged military secrets during his capture, while the body of the essay never devotes any time to it. In short, some of the essays in this volume might have benefited from some revision and rewriting rather than a flat-out reproduction.

Despite these quibbles, *Rethinking Shiloh* is a great leap forward. As Smith notes in his preface, Shiloh is a battle craving attention. (To date, only four modern academic studies of it exist.) More to the point, Smith pushes battlefield studies beyond the traditional guns and trumpets. Indeed, to understand Shiloh, readers have to unpack the myth and memory of it. In that regard, Smith leads the way.

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